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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest outlines what world history is and why and how world history should be implemented into social studies curricula. The Digest offers suggestions on how to improve the study of world history in schools. Topics discussed in the Digest include: "What Is World History?"; "Why World History in the School Curriculum?"; "Major Themes and Habits of Mind for Teaching and Learning World History"; and "Teacher Preparations and Instructional Strategies." Included is a list of references and ERIC resources related to the study of world history. (RJC)

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Teaching World History: The Global Human Experience Through Time

by Simone Arias, Marilynn Hitchens, and Heidi Roupp

What Is World History? World history is the study of human history around the globe through time. World history stretches beyond the boundaries of nation-states or civilizations to form a macro history of the human story. Just as the history of the United States is more than the history of 50 individual states, world history is the study of the global human experience and changes in that experience through time.

World historians study global forces and large historical themes such as climatic change, the spread of religions, and the expansion of the market economy. For example, Columbus in world history is not simply the story of Columbus discovering a "new world." Instead it is the "Columbian exchange," a story of human migrations, transatlantic trade, and the exchange of plants, animals, diseases, art, and technology between the eastern and western hemispheres. World history enables us to improve our understanding of how humans have interacted with each other and the planet in the past to shape the present.

World history became an established field of study with the founding by historians and educators of the World History Association in 1982. This field is in its infancy. Scholarship in world history, as in biological research, is expanding rapidly because of international, collaborative research via the Internet; the increasing number of resources available to world historians; and cross-disciplinary studies with anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, and others in the social sciences. Globalization of the market economy and the development of the international "pop" culture with its bewildering amalgam of many cultural traditions have increased the demand for world history. Yet much remains to be learned. And that is the excitement of world history. When world history class becomes a laboratory where teachers and students form a partnership to investigate what is known to question the unknown, the study of the human story escalates from passive memorization to inquiry and discovery.

Why World History in the School Curriculum? Each age writes its own history. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries were periods of Western influence in politics, economics, and culture. The twenty-first century, however, will belong to world politics, economics, and culture. Consequently, a new history of the world and its people is being written.

Why should this new story be told? Why should it be at the core of the school curriculum? There are many reasons, which pertain to:

- citizenship — creating a body of informed citizens capable of making global decisions for the world body politic at large;
- business — understanding the economic, cultural, and political environment of many countries in order to participate more fully and effectively in the global market place;
- humanity — thinking more deeply and broadly about the whole human experience rather than its provincial parts as a means of deeper and broader human interconnection;
- patterns of thought — developing world history thinking skills; and
- basic knowledge — understanding who we are, how we got that way, and where we are going.

In our interconnected world, the need to share a common history as well as a particular one is a global phenomenon that involves us all. A history of the world experience, as well as the national and local experience, can provide a forum through which, aided by the study of world history, we develop common ideas that transcend cultural and political boundaries.

Major Themes and Habits of Mind for Teaching and Learning World History. Certain universal historical themes shape the common human experience. Bound by neither time nor space, they appear broadly across the globe and centuries. These themes form the basis of world history. They include:

- manipulating and changing the physical environment;
- developing tools and technology;
- peopling the globe;
- diffusing and exchanging ideas, tools, and other facets of culture;
- ending old frontiers and developing new ones; and
- creating increasingly more complex systems of politics, economics, and social interactions.

The study of world history develops certain habits of mind needed by individuals to function in a twenty-first century world of interaction, diversity, and rapid change. These habits of mind include:

- seeing the big picture;
- discerning the common phenomena;
- identifying the spread, exchange, and acceptance or rejection of new ideas;
- making sound historical comparisons; and
- collaborative testing of an historical hypothesis from multiple points of view.

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Teacher Preparation and Instructional Strategies. Teacher preparation in world history must involve strategies to expand both teacher expertise as well as the knowledge base of students. Given the lack of world history preparation of most students (secondary and post-secondary) and the narrow focus of world history in most teacher preparation programs, exploring a comprehensive world history requires research and reflection by instructors and students alike.

Redefining the relationship of teachers and students as a partnership facilitates this educational process. Most social studies teachers started their teaching careers with course work in Western civilization or area studies. Teaching a global world history, however, requires reconceptualization of the subject. Together the class can examine both common themes and the uniqueness of societies within a chronological framework constructed for the course.

A study of world history must encompass both breadth and depth. Most courses focus either narrowly and deeply or broadly and shallowly. A cross section of the two is possible through class lectures and discussions around broad social, political, economic, or cultural themes integrated with focus groups in which students can examine various regions of the world in depth to learn how themes have unfolded during specified eras. This preserves a sense of chronology of events and movements over time, yet also allows for comparisons of societies in different eras or in different regions as the course proceeds. Inquiry is grounded in historical knowledge placed in a broader context.

This structure serves several purposes. First, it makes the overwhelming subject of world history more manageable for students and teachers, particularly with the limitations of time restraints in any course. Second, it reduces the chance of a "one fact after another" approach where students are challenged merely to recall isolated facts covered in the textbook and the teacher lectures without a clear sense of what those facts mean. Third, it promotes critical thinking, a necessity in a democratic system. Discerning fact from opinion and identifying multiple perspectives in cross-cultural encounters are desirable outcomes of instruction in our increasingly interconnected world. Fourth, themes provide a framework for reading for meaning and for the relevance of historical topics. Learning information simply because it is in the textbook does not motivate today's students to become competent, or even interested, in world history. Fifth, the approach can incorporate the wealth of resources available through technology. Using these resources can greatly enhance textbook information, but students must be taught simultaneously how to discriminate between reliable and unreliable resources.

Acquainting students with human history is a daunting task. The overwhelming assignment can be made more manageable, however, if one provides for in-depth regional studies set in the context of a wider realm of human experience. This de-centered approach promotes comparative studies, multiple perspectives including voices of women and minorities, and a more comprehensive understanding of human and environmental events. Analyzing the effects of the past on contemporary life and recognizing the problems of present-minded thinking and the limits of our own perspectives will promote competency in historical thinking.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through interlibrary loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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